

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 19A

MIAMI HERALD
16 February 1985

FILE ONLY

Administration may ask Congress to boost aid to Nicaraguan rebels

By ALFONSO CHARDY
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration is considering a request to Congress that would not only restore but substantially increase aid for Nicaraguan rebels, a senior U.S. official says.

The possibility of increased funding for the anti-Sandinista rebels, known as contras, is part of consultations with congressional leaders, the administration source said.

While acknowledging that congressional reception so far has been cool, the official indicated that chances for a resumption — and even an increase — of aid are likely to improve if the contras unite and President Reagan "takes the case to the people" as he is expected to do.

"You can say that we have been holding discussions with individual members of Congress who recognize the need for aid to the freedom fighters and that the option of raising the amount of funds has not been foreclosed," said the official. He added that "no final decision has been made on how much is needed. But the current amount [\$14 million] might not be enough."

The \$14 million — half the amount the CIA originally sought — has never been given to the guerrillas. It was approved last year, but withheld by Congress in October when it suspended CIA covert aid until at least Feb. 28.

Since the aid suspension, the

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contras have survived on private aid from wealthy Americans and assistance from foreign governments — apparently Israel, El Salvador and Honduras.

To obtain release of the \$14 million, Reagan must ask for it in a report to Congress, which must be approved by both the full House and Senate.

Administration and congressional sources indicate that congressional debate on the resumption of contra funding is not likely to take place until sometime in April, after the Easter recess.

Officials refused to disclose the amount of aid they have in mind, but a congressional source said \$50 million had been mentioned by administration officials in conversations with "some congressional people."

That would be consistent with statements made by Adolfo Calero, commander in chief of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest contra army.

Calero, in an interview last month, said that \$14 million would be "peanuts" and that the FDN needed between \$30 million and \$50 million to double its strength to more than 20,000.

Given the congressional mood, the possibility of renewing aid even at the \$14 million level appears dim. But congressional aides said that if the rebels unite and all negotiating avenues with the Sandinista government in Managua are closed, the prospects for changing the mood will be greatly enhanced.

A White House official said the president is resolved to persuade Congress and the American people to help the contras.

"The President feels very strongly about this issue and thinks we should take it to the country," the aide said, indicating Reagan may make a nationwide address to fuel support and put pressure on Congress.

As a dress rehearsal, administration sources said Reagan would make a forceful appeal for renewed aid today during his weekly radio talk from Santa Barbara, Calif., where he is vacationing.

The president, according to an administration official, will "be talking about the contras and the necessity for our giving financial aid, and I underscore the word financial, to these contras... We have given them financial aid last year, and he wants to give them financial aid this year."